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THE HOLISTIC APPROACH: USING DRAMA IN THE SECONDARY ESL CLASSROOM

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INTRODUCTION

Drama has long been part of the education curriculum in many parts of the world, and can in effect be considered a subject in its own right, complete with its own unique set of objectives and syllabi. In fact, using drama in education has been a concept that has been employed since before the time of Ancient Greece. However, the Ancient Greeks, through the works of Aristotle, were the first people to formalise the notion that drama was a representation of real life, and similar to real life, man is able to learn from it (Heath 1996). In his treatise ‘The Poetics’, Aristotle outlines six elements of drama, which are:

- 1 PLOT – what happens in a play; the order of events, the story as opposed to the theme; what happens rather than what it means.
- 2 THEME – what the play means as opposed to what happens (plot); the main idea within the play.
- 3 CHARACTER – the personality or the part an actor represents in a play; a role played by an actor in a play.
- 4 DICTION/LANGUAGE/DIALOGUE – the word choices made by the playwright and the enunciation of the actors delivering the lines.
- 5 MUSIC/RHYTHM – by music Aristotle meant the sound, rhythm and melody of the speeches.
- 6 SPECTACLE – the visual elements of the production of a play; the scenery, costumes, and special effects in a production. (Ibid.)

In today's field of teaching, Maley and Duff (1982: 6), long considered to be the modern forefathers of using drama (specifically 'drama techniques') in teaching the English language, propound the notion that drama is in fact an integral part for teaching the language, due to the fact that drama activities "draw upon the natural ability of each person to imitate, mimic, and express himself through gesture", and without which language lessons may appear to be dreary and de-motivating to the learners. Wessels (1987) further supports using drama to teach language by stating that drama can help the teacher to achieve 'reality' in several ways. It can overcome the students' resistance to learning the new language by making the learning of the new language an enjoyable experience, setting realistic targets for the students to aim for, fashioning a creative 'slowing down' of real experience, and by linking the language-learning experience with the student's own experience of life.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

For many years, the mainstream of the English language teacher training programs (i.e.: Dip.Ed, B.Ed, and M.Ed TESL) in Malaysia has concentrated on training teachers on elements of teaching that have been successful in the past, and these include methodology, materials selection, using the communicative approach and so on. Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, however, is an example of a teaching institution that raises the bar by making it mandatory for its B.Sc with Education (TESL) students minor in Information Technology (IT), to master certain programs that will enable them to incorporate these elements in their teaching. Nevertheless, in the course of integrating the teaching techniques of the past and those of the future, it can be seen that certain teaching techniques that do not directly conform to the mainstream of teacher training are given less priority, or even bypassed altogether. Such a technique would be training future teachers on using drama in the language classroom, where many

teachers and teacher trainers alike do not see the necessity of engaging in the ‘frivolity’ of using such a teaching technique that would distance themselves from the accepted conventions of learning for examinations. Therefore, it would stand to reason that in most teacher training programs, teaching using drama is either rarely offered as an elective to be taken (as in the case of the UTM B.Sc with Education TESL program) or not offered at all.

As a result, a vast majority of students all over the country have little or no exposure at all to being taught using drama or drama techniques in the language classroom. Consequently, when a teacher tries to use drama, he may face a certain amount of resistance in the students, especially in schools that have a tradition of academic achievement in the Malaysian context. Therefore, this may further depreciate the value of using drama in the language classroom, adding to the vicious cycle that drama is impractical in the Malaysian context, and that it may be considered ‘frivolous’ to train future teachers in the benefits of using drama in the language classroom, where time could be utilised to train them in other ‘more beneficial’ teaching techniques.

To further understand this phenomenon, this study was designed to gauge the perceptions of two main groups, the first being practicing teachers who were in various stages of completing their M.Ed TESL in UTM, and the second being a group of teachers who were trained in using drama and drama techniques while in a teacher training institution.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

With the implementation of this study, it is hoped that Malaysian teacher trainers can be made more aware of the benefits of using drama in the language classroom, which would in turn affect the content of what they teach to their students – the future teachers. With enough teachers trained in drama and drama techniques, the way should be

paved for a cultural change in Malaysian students, where the focus of learning does not just have to be in the form of students sitting down at their desks and waiting for the teacher to bestow knowledge to them. These students can be convinced that learning can also take place when they move their bodies about, utilise their imagination, and have a good time in the language classroom.

DEFINITION OF THE HOLISTIC APPROACH IN USING DRAMA

In context of the study, the term ‘drama’ would apparently have to be defined in the teaching-learning context, and moreover it has to be taken into consideration that drama as an instrument of teaching encompasses many different aspects, and that a focal point has to be developed in order to fully utilise the study at hand. However, in limiting the scope of the area of study we may be blinding ourselves to any potential benefits of the overlooked aspects. For example, let us examine the differences between two aspects of drama and they are ‘stage drama’ and ‘drama techniques’.

Stage drama or theatre can be seen as the more traditional definition of drama; here the script is studied and acted out, usually in front of an audience. The production is usually processed by a team of players (actors), stagehands, costume makers, technicians and so on. In the school context, because of the close ties to drama, literature and language, educational drama usually works hand in hand with English, and in some cases, is a part of the teaching of English. For example the works of Shakespeare are studied and acted time and time again as part of the literature curriculum. Students are exposed to the nuances found in the language. Parry (1972) advocates the opinion that drama is such an integral part of English that without it, English cannot be taught as effectively as it should be. This is because drama embodies the very essence of language, combining speech with movements of the whole body as part of making a memorable learning experience. Moreover, because stage drama calls upon the preparation of an end

product, the students find themselves compelled to foster a spirit of cooperation with one another, each playing a part in producing the final polished performance. It is this form of drama which most teachers and students in the Malaysian context are familiar with.

Drama techniques, on the other hand, are defined by Maley and Duff (1982: 6) as activities that ‘draw upon the natural ability of every person to imitate, mimic, and express him or herself through gesture’. Because of the rather limited scope of the meaning, the definition is to be augmented slightly by adding that even though gesture is important, it is only a part of the whole process, and that drama activities encompass imitating, mimicking and expressing through any means necessary, including gesture and verbalisation. As a result numerous techniques become available, among them the use of role-play, dance-drama, mime and so on. The important point to note is that the activities are not minor performances in preparation for a major performance in a stage production, but rather they are isolated activities with the intent of focusing on the given task at hand. Inherently, this is the form of drama in education in which the majority of Malaysian teachers are not trained to implement.

No matter how drama in education is seen as a stage drama or the employment of drama techniques, it is still part of the same foundation and can be “seen as one continuum” (Dougill 1987: 2). For that reason, in this study both these terms shall be looked at as under the generic term ‘drama’, and the techniques used as ‘drama techniques’. The coined term ‘holistic approach’ can be regarded as an umbrella term encompassing this single continuum of ‘drama’ and utilising its benefits in the language classroom in a holistic manner, which encapsulates language learning benefits for personal self-development benefits.

THE STUDY

There are two parts in the study, both surveys in the form of interview for the first group, and questionnaire via e-mail for the second group.

These surveys were initially taken as data for follow-up research on drama, and were in fact initially independent from each other. The first survey was carried out in 2005, and the second survey was carried out in 2007. The purpose of there being two surveys was to show the differences between two target groups and their perceptions towards using drama in the Malaysian ESL Classroom (MESLC).

SURVEY A

This 2005 survey was carried out via interviews to a group of 32 practicing teachers who were in various stages of completing their M.Ed TESL in UTM. These teachers were of no particular grouping, and came from a variety of schools in different Socio-economic (SES) settings from all over Johor state. Their ages varied from 24-47 years old, hypothetically ensuring a demographical mixture of attitudes, training, and perceptions. Three questions were asked in the interview, and they are as stated below:

- 1 Question 1: Are you aware of drama and drama techniques as a teaching tool?
- 2 Question 2: Have you been trained in any way to use drama or drama techniques in your teaching?
- 3 Question 3: Have you used any form of drama in your teaching?

The findings can be seen in the tables below:

YES	NO
39%	63%

Table 1: Are you aware of drama and drama techniques as a teaching tool?

YES	NO
0%	100%

Table 2: Have you been trained in any way to use drama or drama techniques in your teaching?

YES	NO
5%	95%

Table 3: Have you used any form of drama in your teaching?

DISCUSSION ON SURVEY A

From these three questions, it can be clearly seen that the first group of practicing teachers were not trained in the use of drama/drama techniques, and a vast majority of them did not use it in their teaching. What can be gleaned from this is that the teachers were not fully aware of the benefits of using drama in the language classroom, or were aware to a certain degree but did not carry out drama activities due to lack of training, thus resulting in the fear of uncertainty or even losing control of a class. This is most probably because the majority of these teachers were products of the 'traditional' training in teacher training institutes, whereby they are given a good all-round education on being teachers. However, because of the current system that has been in place for a good number of years, they do not receive the necessary exposure to drama, or even the creative arts for that matter. Again, it has to be stressed that this is through no fault of the teachers, but is a result of a system that needs to be enhanced to cater for more enjoyment and motivation in the teaching and learning process.

SURVEY B

In 2007, a questionnaire was sent out via e-mail to a whole batch of students who had graduated from teacher training institutes, and were fully trained in using creative drama in language teaching. Of the questionnaires sent, a total of 50 were returned. These teachers came from all over the country, including the interiors of Sabah and Sarawak, and some were also posted in remote places. However, the majority of the returned responses came from the teachers posted in developed areas with access to telephones and computers. The questionnaire was distributed via e-mail, obtained from an internet mailing list.

The questions from the questionnaire were as follows:

- 1 Question 1: As school students, did your teachers ever carry out language activities that required the use of drama/drama techniques?
- 2 Question 2: As practising teachers trained in using drama, do you use drama/drama techniques in your teaching?
- 3 Question 3: What are the benefits you see in your students when you use drama/drama techniques?

The findings can be seen in the tables below:

YES	NO
24%	76%

Table 4: As school students, did your teachers ever carry out language activities that required the use of drama/drama techniques?

YES	NO
86%	14%

Table 5: As practising teachers trained in using drama, do you use drama/drama techniques in your teaching?

Confidence in communicating	92%
Enjoyed lessons	96%
More expressive	88%
Better learning	64%

Table 6: What are the benefits you see in your students when you use drama/drama techniques?

DISCUSSION ON SURVEY B

The first table shows that even as students, only a minority of the students had undergone any experience in learning English under a teacher who used drama as a medium of instruction, and this would tally with the earlier finding in Survey A (though Survey A showed an even smaller bracket for teachers who used drama). However, it can be visibly noted that a vast majority of the teachers in Survey B actually practiced what they were trained to do, which in terms of drama in education would mean a significant improvement in the perceptions and practices of these teachers.

Table 6 shows that the major benefits that could be seen in students, the highest ranking being that enjoyment factor. In line with the Affective Filter principle as put forward by Krashen (1985), the higher the enjoyment, the lower the affective filter; the lower the affective filter, the higher the acquisition. Moreover, the second biggest benefit that the teachers noted in their students was their level

of confidence in communicating, as is required by the principles of Communicative Language Teaching that is theoretically practiced in Malaysian schools. Furthermore, an additional bonus was that many of the students became more expressive in the classes, which is always a welcome change from unresponsive students who look down every time a question is asked.

Nevertheless, another finding that was positive but not up to the expected mark is better learning experience. Although 64% is moderately good, the expected percentage was initially projected to be closer to the 80% -90% range, where most of the benefits are placed. Perhaps a better way to increase this number would be providing better training and more diversity in drama techniques used in the class.

CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, the benefits of applying the holistic approach to drama can be clearly seen, where the most of the students enjoyed a significant increase in their motivation, communication, and of course in their learning. However, a vast majority of teachers are still unaware of these benefits, and more importantly, need training in using the holistic approach in using drama in the language classroom. Moreover, even though drama has been applied by teachers in the past, it has yet to become a norm in the MESLC.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Introduce drama as a subject in all teacher training colleges/universities that offer TESL. The subject should include exposure to both stage drama and drama techniques.
2. Carry out short courses that can be offered by individuals, colleges/universities, or government agencies.
3. For trained teachers to apply and spread their knowledge via in-house training

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